

Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, eds. *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. viii + 406; ISBN: 978-0-8223-4803-0

The theoretical lenses through which the African diaspora is read and defined have shifted significantly over time. Calls for an essential black identity unified across space and time by a shared history, culture or collective memory, have given way to national and trans-national articulations of diaspora. Theories drawn from fields as wide ranging as Feminist Studies and Economics have been applied to the African diaspora, often converging uneasily under the umbrella of postcolonialism. Throughout these monumental paradigm shifts, the physical delineation of diasporic space has hardly been contested, and has remained focused on the cardinal points of the infamous trans-Atlantic triangle. In *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe push against the boundaries of the African diaspora as it is currently demarcated in the field of Postcolonial Studies. The editors of this collection assemble a wide range of essays that provide evidence for the presence of significant populations of African slaves in Central America between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as an analysis of the implications of this presence on present-day racial identification and political participation primarily in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Costa Rica.

*Blacks and Blackness in Central America* speaks to a number of academic fields. It addresses African Diaspora Studies and argues cogently and persuasively for a redefinition of the geographic limits of the field. It also speaks to Latin-American Studies and the equally limiting reading of race within the boundaries of *mestizo* nationalist discourse that obscures African presence and the transnational flow of bodies, ideas and identities in the Central American region. The first part of the collection focuses on the colonial period and on the intertwined fortunes of blacks, enslaved and free, Amerindian communities and the white planter class. Paul Lokken opens the conversation with an analysis of the significant population of African and African-descended migrants in the Amatitlan region of Guatemala. Lokken's essay sets the tone for the rest of the volume by presenting evidence for the upward social mobility available to enslaved Africans and migrant workers through marriage and acquisition of wealth. Indeed many of the contributions to this volume explore the inextricably intertwined notions of freedom and mobility on one hand, and the economic situation of the geographic area in question.

Russell Lohse explores one of the manifestations of this intertwined relationship in his essay on African slave labour on the cacao haciendas in Costa Rica. The broad understanding of slavery as comprising either no, or else limited physical mobility is called into question with Lohse's description of the "independent lives" of labourers left to their own devices by absentee owners of cacao plantations. The fact that cacao also served as legal tender with which slaves could buy their freedom renders the boundaries between slave and free, black and white more porous than has been suggested by studies on the Atlantic African diaspora. Karl Offen addresses these notions of racial fluidity in his study of movement and intermarriage between Amerindians and Africans on the Mosquito Coast. In her analysis of the meat boycott organized by African construction workers at the Spanish fort at Omoa, Rina Gomez sheds further light on the often tense economic dimensions of diaspora and reveals the African population to be a significant economic force. Catherine Komisaruk closes the chapter on the colonial period with a portrait of the different routes to emancipation available to African slaves in Guatemala. The difficult path to economic and personal freedom, again closed off to many slaves in the Atlantic New World,

took on different forms including flight, manumission and purchase of freedom, as well as the *papel de venta*, a phenomenon distinct to the region.

If the first half of *Blacks and Blackness in Central America* eloquently argues the case for inclusion of African slaves and migrant workers into the historical landscape of the region as a significant economic force, the second half of the volume skillfully takes up the political dimension of the African diaspora in Central America. The racial questions at the heart of the nation-building project in Nicaragua in the immediate independence period, is the focus of three consecutive essays in this volume. Justin Wolfe explores the role of prominent Afro-Nicaraguan Liberals in the country's political history while Lowell Gudmundson analyses the 1883 census as a one-time departure from the otherwise binary definition of national identity in Nicaragua as white in contrast to a perceived Indian Other. Indeed the stigmatization of the Amerindian population recurs in a number of essays including Juliet Hooker's, which explores the racialization of space and the sequestering of the Amerindian population on the Mosquito Coast from the rest of the newly emergent nation.

The relationships between Africans and the Amerindian population in Nicaragua is a potential bridge between African Diaspora Studies and American Studies, two fields which have largely been separated in the Atlantic context because of the notion of little temporal overlap between the native Amerindian populations that were largely decimated before the influx of African slaves. Lara Putnam gives an example of this region-wide approach in her look at migratory patterns of Anglophone West Indians to Central America, primarily during the building of the Panama Canal. Ronald Harpelle too simultaneously zooms out onto the entire Central American region and zooms in on white enclaves and communities created by the United Fruit Company. The spatialization of race here takes on the issue of racial segregation through the intimate lens of domestic arrangements and choice of dinnerware. Finally, Mauricio Meléndez Obando closes the volume with a captivating array of visual images that seek to capture traces of the presence of Africans in portraits of high-profile Nicaraguan and Costa Rican politicians, bringing full circle the stated aims of the volume's editors, to counter the erasure of African presence in the economic and political history of Central America.

The much-needed intervention of *Blacks and Blackness in Central America* is limited by its own unquestioning acceptance of the racial categories it analyses. This limitation runs through almost all if not all of the essays in the volume. The authors assume certain basic definitions or characteristics of white, black, mulatto and Amerindian and proceed from there to challenge commonly held notions of uncrossable boundaries between slavery and freedom, economic and physical mobility. Gudmundson, for example, asserts that "inescapably nonwhite, nonelite *mestizos*, *mulattos*, and *zambos*" (210) were central Liberal figures in Nicaraguan politics. The focus here then is not the racial self-identification of these personalities but rather the "inescapable" racial tag that defines them as non-white and points to the presence of African ancestry. Nowhere are these underlying assumptions about racial identity more prominent than in Obando's visual text which encourages us to read the evidence of blackness in the physical traits of the past-presidents and bishops he displays. The fact that the "third root, the African, is present everywhere in America," (335) for Obando manifests itself not only in architecture, music and food, but also in "the blood that runs in [the] veins" (335) of the people of the region today. These essentializing notions of racial identity reify existing categories, sometimes accepting them as they were articulated during the colonial period. This outlook in turn muddies the waters of an otherwise clear call for a redefinition of economic categories and political agency alongside the desire to push against the existing geographic limits of diaspora.

The inability of the essays in this volume to propose new understandings of racial categories beyond their official use by the colonial administration, does not take away from the overall value of the text. Indeed it presents a new point of departure for subsequent conversation on how the historical evidence presented here may lead to new readings and articulations of racial identity in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period from the perspectives of the more marginalized groups in the African diaspora. How did the first generations descended from African slaves in Central America assert themselves racially? In what ways did their self-definitions counter or subvert the “official” classifications? From here the larger conversation with African diaspora studies and Latin-American studies can begin, the more inclusive dialogue that the editors of this volume hope will provide a new lens through which to re-read and re-define race in the African diaspora worldwide.

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